Six Points On Luther's "Epistle of Straw"

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Almost five hundred years after the fact, Roman Catholics still scrutinize Martin Luther. One the most popular quotations from Luther is the infamous "epistle of straw" remark, directed at the canonicity of the book of James. It really is amazing how frequently this citation appears. It is usually brought forth as proof one must believe an infallible church authored an infallible list of infallible books. Without this, one subjectively decides which books are canonical, like Martin Luther supposedly did in the sixteenth century.If you find yourself in dialog facing this quote, there are a few facts and arguments you should know.

First, this quote only appears in Luther's original 1522 *Preface to the New Testament*. After 1522, all the editions of Luther's Bible dropped the "epistle of straw" comment, along with the entire paragraph that placed value judgments on particular biblical books. It was Luther himself who edited these comments out. For anyone to continue to cite Luther's "epistle of straw" comment against him is to do him an injustice. He saw fit to retract the comment. Subsequent citations of this quote should bear this in mind.

Second, detractors are keen on selectively quoting Luther's *preface to James*. Most often cited are only those comments that express negativity. If one takes the times to actually read Luther's comments about James, he praises it and considers it a "good book" "because it sets up no doctrine of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God." Rarely have I seen Luther detractors inform a reader Luther praises James, or respects God's law. On the other hand, I have seen many Catholics insist Luther was either morally corrupt or an antinomian. Luther though insists James is worthy of praise because it puts forth Gods law.

Third, Luther does appear to have held lifelong doubts about the canonicity of James, but it wasn't because he was purely subjective as Roman Catholics claim. He did not whimsically dismiss Biblical books simply because he did not like their content. Luther was aware of the disputed authenticity of the book. Eusebius and Jerome both recorded doubts to the apostolicity and canonicity of James. Luther did not consider James to be *James the Apostle*. He wasn't alone in this. The great humanist Scholar Erasmus likewise questioned the authenticity of James, as did Cardinal Cajetan, one of the leading 16th Century Roman Catholic scholars.

Fourth, it is true Luther had a contextual problem with the content on James. He saw a contradiction between Paul and James on faith and works. Some conclude Luther missed the harmonization between these two Biblical writers, but this isn't true either. Luther's great biographer Roland Bainton pointed out, "Once Luther remarked that he would give his doctor's beret to anyone who could reconcile James and Paul. Yet he did not venture to reject James from the canon of Scripture, and on occasion earned his own beret by effecting reconciliation. 'Faith,' he wrote, 'is a living, restless thing. It cannot be inoperative. We are not saved by works; but if there be no works, there must be something amiss with faith' " [Here I Stand, 259]. In *The Disputation Concerning Justification*, Luther answered this spurious proposition: *Faith without works justifies, Faith without works is dead* [Jas. 2:17, 26]. *Therefore, dead faith justifies*. Luther responded:

> "The argument is sophistical and the refutation is resolved grammatically. In the major premise, 'faith' ought to be placed with the word 'justifies' and the portion of the sentence 'without works justifies' is placed in a predicate periphrase and must refer to the word 'justifies,' not to 'faith.' In the minor premise, 'without works' is truly in the subject periphrase and refers to faith. We say that justification is effective without works, not that faith is without works. For that faith which lacks fruit is not an efficacious but a feigned faith. 'Without works' is ambiguous, then. For that reason this argument settles nothing. It is one thing that faith justifies without works; it is another thing that faith exists without works. [LW 34: 175-176].

Even though Luther arrived at the harmonizing solution, it is probably the case that the question of James' apostleship out-weighed it. One cannot argue Luther was never presented with a harmonization between Paul and James. He seems to have granted the validity of it, yet still questioned the canonicity of the book.

Fifth, its important to point out the double standard at play when Catholics bring up Luther's opinion on James. If it comes up, hypothetically grant the validity of the Roman Catholic Church declaring the contents of the canon. Then point out Erasmus, Luther, and Cajetan formed their opinions and debated these issues previous to the Council of Trent's declaration. The New Catholic Encyclopedia points out,

> "According to Catholic doctrine, the proximate criterion of the Biblical

> canon is the infallible decision of the Church. This decision was not given until rather late in the history of the Church (at the Council of Trent). Before that time there was some doubt about the canonicity of certain Biblical books, i.e., about their belonging to the canon."

Erasmus, Cajetan, and Luther had every right within the Catholic system to engage in Biblical criticism and debate over the extent of the Canon. All expressed *some doubt*.Their's was not a radical higher criticism. The books they questioned were books that had been questioned by previous generations. None were so extreme as to engage in Marcion-like canon-destruction. Both Erasmus and Luther translated the entirety of Bible, and published it.

Finally, Luther says he cannot include James among his chief books "though I would not thereby prevent anyone from including or extolling him as he pleases, for there are otherwise many good sayings in him." These are hardly the words of one claiming to be an infallible authority or a "super-pope" (as one Catholic apologist used to claim). This points out an important flaw in Catholic argumentation. Some actually argue as if we think Luther was an infallible authority. Luther didn't think he was, and I've yet to meet a Protestant who considers him anything more than a sinner saved by grace, imperfect, yet used by God during a crucial period in history.

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